

# Wudang Mountain and Mount Zion in Taiwan: Syncretic Processes in Space, Ritual Performance, and Imagination<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this paper, I develop a detailed consideration of ways in which Chinese religious practitioners, including Daoists, Christians, and spirit mediums, deploy syncretism in complex fields of practice. Rather than focusing on doctrinal blending, this study emphasises the ways in which these practitioners combine elements from diverse religious traditions through the media of ritual performance, visual representation, story, and landscape. After considering the diverse ways in which syncretic processes may be deployed in a field of practice, the paper investigates three ethnographic cases, exploring ritual co-celebration at Wudang Mountain in South-central China, charismatic Christian practices in Singapore, and the recent development of Holy Mount Zion as a Christian pilgrim site in Taiwan.

## Keywords

syncretism, Daoism, Christianity, spirit mediums, ritual practice, sacred landscapes

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<sup>1</sup> I presented earlier versions of this talk at a Mellon Graduate Research Workshop on “Sacred Geographies: Space, Place, & Network in Asian Religions & Cultures,” Stanford University Center for Buddhist Studies, at an Anthropology Department faculty seminar at Lethbridge University in 2004, and at the Ukrainian Folklore Studies and Anthropology Department Graduate seminars at the University of Alberta in 2008. I base this paper on ethnographic and archival research conducted over many years, most recently with support from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. I wish to thank Vineeta Sinha and Daniel P.S. Goh for the invitation to contribute to this special volume on syncretism, and Steven Ferzacca, Stephan Feuchtwang, Mariya Lesiv, John Pang, the anonymous reviewer and Daniel Goh for comments on earlier versions of this paper. I am especially grateful to Hsu Yutsuen for arranging a visit to Mount Zion in Taiwan in May 2008, and to friends and colleagues, including Ch'ng Oon Hooi, Chung Kwang Tong (Wei-yi), Dong Luo, Lai Ah Eng, Pang Lijun, Wu Xu, and Victor Yue.

## Introduction

On a recent visit to Penang I strolled with a friend through Little India, a vibrant shopping district jammed with shops selling Indian goods, from videos and religious icons to brilliantly coloured fabrics and saris. At the entrance to one large corner shop, the shopkeeper had placed two large brightly coloured freestanding cardboard cut-outs, one of Jesus and another of Ganesh. The side-by-side images suggest the sort of tolerant co-existence that multicultural and multi-religious Malaysians pride themselves on. Whether he offered them for sale or used them to advertise services in sign manufacturing, surely the shopkeeper would have been aware that orthodox Hindus, Catholics, and Protestant Christians would not have displayed these two together in their temples and churches. Some evangelical Protestants (influenced perhaps by American televangelist Pat Robertson) might even be troubled by this carefree juxtaposition of Jesus to an elephant-headed deity that they regard as demonic.

In contrast, in the mix-and-match jungle temples that Vineeta Sinha describes in her contribution to this volume (2008), no such boundary-setting

**Figure 1: Cardboard cut-out images of Jesus and Ganesh in Little India, Penang, December 2007. (Photograph: Jean DeBernardi)**



perspectives would prevent devotees from venerating both Ganesh and Jesus in the space of a single shrine or in a set of adjacent shrines. And as Yeoh Seng Guan (2008) notes, individuals who typically worship in a Hindu temple may travel on pilgrimage to a Catholic church on Saint Anne's feast day, treating a feast day in the Catholic liturgical calendar as if it were an Asian festival. As he describes it, worshippers enter the church and touch the statues of the saints seeking spiritual power, a gesture that is part of a Hindu habitus of worship.

The juxtaposition of two cardboard signs probably expresses nothing more than the eclecticism of the marketplace. But religious practitioners may innovate in their practice by drawing together elements of different religious traditions in new conjunctions in ritual practice, textual and oral narrative, and/or material expression. In cases where practitioners use religion to draw strict boundaries between insiders and others, their leaders commonly deplore such blendings as polluting and seek to restore the purity of doctrine and practice.

But the syncretic label is not always applied pejoratively. Western scholars often describe Chinese popular religious culture as syncretic (or even eclectic), recognising, as many practitioners do, that the practice of popular religious culture blend elements drawn from diverse religious and ritual traditions. Some syncretic religions are self-consciously fashioned, like the three-in-one religion that Lin Zhao'en founded in the sixteenth century and that venerated Confucius, Laozi, and the Buddha on a single altar while promoting Confucian values (Dean, 1998). The arrangement of the altar expressed an attitude of inclusiveness that resembles that of European Masonic organisations that drew together members from diverse religious backgrounds, requiring only that they affirm their belief in a creator god that they called the Great Architect of the Universe (see Chapter 3 in DeBernardi, 2004). Similarly, the syncretic teachings of modern groups, like the Red Swastika Society and I Guandao, emphasise that all the major world religions share a common root, and offer veneration to the founders of the five major world religions at the same time that they highly esteem Daoism.<sup>2</sup>

Webster's dictionary defines syncretism as: "An effort to reconcile and unite various systems of philosophy or religious systems on the basis of tenets common to all and against a common opponent" (Editors of the New International Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2002:978). This definition suggests a strategic use of syncretism to win adherents in a situation of competition, but also implies that the core of syncretic fusion is doctrinal. Historical and ethnographic sources attest, however, that syncretic processes play out in not

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<sup>2</sup> Studies of modern Chinese sectarian groups include Tan Chee-beng (1985), Jordan and Overmyer (1986), Soo Khin Wah (1997) and Clart (2007).

only in the philosophical task of reconciling competing doctrines, but also in the historical reconciliation of different groups, including local communities with their territorial cults and ancestral deities and civilisational religions, such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

We might consider religious interactions as three points on a continuum. Many religions maintain boundaries between insiders and outsiders, sometimes limiting entry to those willing to renounce previous religious commitments through performance of a bridge-burning ritual of conversion. At the other end of the continuum is the dissolving of boundaries when formerly distinct religions are blended. Unless devotees have a compelling reason to restore older cultural forms, they typically have little awareness of the complex history of their practices.<sup>3</sup> Between these two extremes we find religious practices that express amity between religious traditions that join together in action or imagination while maintaining awareness of their distinct identities.

In this paper, I will use the term *anti-syncretism* to describe strict boundary maintenance (see Stewart and Shaw, 1994) and *syncretic fusion* to describe what is often termed syncretic. When syncretism is an active process, religious practitioners self-consciously join together elements derived from different religious traditions. Where awareness of the multiple sources remains active I regard these as symbolic expression of *syncretic amity*, and distinguish them from *symbolic encompassment*, which is the practice of incorporating elements of another religious tradition in a subordinate symbolic role.

Like any social relationship, syncretic and anti-syncretic relationships unfold in space, time, and imagination. Consequently, rather than focusing on doctrine, I place space, ritual performance and imagination at the core of a consideration of religious syncretism. In their everyday practices people experience space in a socially structured way, as Pierre Bourdieu (1990) so brilliantly illustrated in his analysis of the way that the Kabyle people of Algeria construct, label, inhabit, and move in and out of a house. Religious actors also construct, label, move in and out of (and sometimes inhabit) religious structures and sacred sites, which are further associated with historic communities, identities, and projects. Indeed, religious constructions contribute to the production of locality, sometimes by sacralising space so that it remains in the control and under the protection of a specific community. As Arjun Appadurai (1996 [1995]) has stressed, the production of locality takes place in the face of pressures from many and diverse players, including governmental and economic forces. Under threat, cosmologies supporting autochthonous claims to

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<sup>3</sup> The process of de-syncretising the symbols and ritual practices of local religions from world religions that absorbed them is sometimes found in nationalist movements and popular neopaganism. See, for example, MacKenzie (1999) and Lesiv (2007).

a centred territory may inform secular histories, and custodial rituals become politicised (Feuchtwang, 2004:6).

Although they may seek to define their sacred centres as the world axis around which all creation revolves, most people, in fact, practice their religions in a diverse field of practice in which they are at least aware of religious alternatives. In situations of diversity, we often find mutual influence and selective alliance, which I term *syncretic amity*, but also *competition* and *mutual differentiation*, which may be expressed in anti-syncretic campaigns whose emotional tone verges on animosity. Amity may be a relationship of equality, including competition among equals (symbolised in a brotherhood or sisterhood), but often is hierarchical. Relative rank is readily expressed in spatial arrangements of centrality and marginality, height and lowness, before and after. Religious actors often imagine enemies, by contrast, as cosmological foes: demons, monsters, evil magicians and wicked monks.

After considering narrative, ritual, and material expressions of syncretic amity, and also the boundary-maintaining anti-syncretic practices, I offer three ethnographic cases as illustration. The first focuses on a popular pilgrimage site in China, the Daoist temple complex at Wudang Mountain. The second concerns the Singaporean charismatic Christian adoption of the practices associated with spiritual warfare. My third case — Holy Mount Zion in Taiwan — melds traditional Chinese ideas about sacred space with Christianity in a powerful synthesis. In every case, I seek to consider the field of practice, a field that includes competing religions but also issues of state control in three modern nation-states, China, Singapore and Taiwan, as well as economic competition in a religious marketplace.

### **The Religious Field of Practice**

In this paper, I propose that we consider religious interactions (including syncretic juxtaposition and blending) in a field of practice that includes other religions but also secular institutions and the exigencies of history and memory in local communities. Following Stanley Tambiah's work on religion in a Thai village, I term this situation of religious interaction a field of practice (1970). As Daniel Goh (2008) stresses in his contribution to this volume, "Political, economic and cultural flows that drive the expansion and deepening of modernity..." have promoted both transfiguration and hybridisation in the religious field.

Most religions incorporate boundary-maintaining mechanisms and many further resonate with ethno-national identity. Although Islam spans many ethno-national groups, in Malaysia the religion is part of the constitutional

definition of Malay identity, and indeed anyone who seeks to claim Malay identity must practice Islam. For Chinese, the revolution weakened the link between Chinese traditions like Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism and Chinese identity, promoting secular ideologies (including Marxism). Singapore declares itself to be a secular state while promoting the usefulness of its diverse religious traditions as cultural ballast (as politicians like to term it). Nonetheless, some critics view the government's endorsement of Confucian values to represent a bias towards the culture of its Chinese majority.

In a modern, globalised world, religious practitioners may have little control over some aspects of their field of practice, including the political systems of the nations in which they live. But they may extend their field of practice beyond their local communities through migration, travel, and communication technologies, sometimes building networks with global reach. As they build these elective networks, they encounter different fields of practice in different locales. *Operation World*, a book popular with contemporary evangelical Christians, is precisely an attempt to map the world in light of the question of how different nation-states are likely to receive Christian evangelists — providing detailed information on politics (including restrictions on evangelism) and religious competitors (Johnstone, 1993).

Religions and their practitioners commonly claim power and/or influence in a specific locale either through association with a numerically dominant group or with the state. Indeed, in many modern nation-states, religions still resonate with ethno-national identity. As I mention above, the Malaysian constitution requires that anyone who wishes to claim Malay identity must not only speak the Malay language and follow Malay custom, but also must practice Islam. The Malaysian government has further promoted the image of Malaysia as a Muslim country by building spectacular new mosques in central locations in two of Malaysia's major cities. In 1965, the government built an enormous National Mosque with a capacity of 15,000 people in downtown Kuala Lumpur (in the process displacing a small Christian church) as a symbol of Malaysia's independence; in the 1970s the Penang government appropriated land belonging to a Chinese school to build a new state mosque in a central location. Undoubtedly these government-sponsored alterations to Malaysia's built environment forcefully assert that Islam is Malaysia's official religion.

In an apparent response, Penang Buddhists raised money to build a towering statue of the Goddess of Mercy (*Guanyin*) at Kek Lok Si temple. But because some politicians objected to the fact that the height of the proposed statue was greater than that of the new state mosque, its builders were forced to shorten it, leaving the white robed Goddess of Mercy with no neck. The

change diminished its attractiveness and structural viability and in 2002 Kek Lok Si constructed a 30.2 metre bronze statue of the Goddess of Mercy to replace it (see DeBernardi, 2004:143).

Singapore is a secular state that promotes religious tolerance and harmony in a multi-religious society (see Lai, 2008). Although Singapore has no official religion, secularism and commercialism frame the field of practice for religious groups. Because Singapore has a limited land base, the government has adopted policies of urban development that give priority to the needs of modern commerce over the historic claims of religious groups and local communities. As a consequence, many temples have been dislocated from central locations to marginal industrial areas. Some, lacking the resources to build, continue to exist by operating small illegal shrines in the living rooms of high-rise flats.

When redevelopment forces a smaller temple to relocate, the management committee may not be able to raise the millions of dollars needed to lease land and build a freestanding temple. Commonly the management committees of several dislocated temples join together to share a building that houses multiple independent shrines. Consequently, we find the interesting situation whereby financial cooperation leads to the spatial juxtaposition of altars without doctrinal or ritual blending.<sup>4</sup>

The religious field of practice also has informal and unofficial dimensions. Cities like Penang and Singapore offer individuals ample opportunities to interact with individuals who practice a variety of religions, including those that are strongly identified with ethnic groups. Undoubtedly political policy may lay down broad parameters for inter-religious interaction, as when the Singapore government promotes religious harmony through education, inter-religious dialog, and the collective recitation of a scripted ethos entitled the *Declaration on Religious Harmony* (see DeBernardi, 2008a). But even without the formal mechanisms of state-driven inter-religious dialogues, in religiously diverse social environments individuals have the opportunity to learn about other religions through word-of-mouth, personal observation, and mass media sources. Indeed, in doing ethnographic research on religion in Asia, I have found that religious practitioners like ministers, monks, and spirit mediums often have extensive knowledge of and opinions about one another's activities. Christians, Buddhists, and Daoists now place their messages on websites, and

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<sup>4</sup> At one Singaporean temple, for example, a shrine to the Nine Emperor Gods is lodged with a Buddhist shrine. Each has its own management committee and each stages separate events with their respective leaders and devotees. By contrast, in Penang, when five Christian denominations competed for a building site in a new housing development, the city planning office suggested that they cooperate to build and share a multi-story building. The churches declined to do so, and the church that had applied first won the right to build.

if a person is curious to know more about these religions, they may simply do a search on the Internet.<sup>5</sup>

Mutual knowledge may lead to competition (as when the Penang Chinese sought to build a monumental statue that rivalled the new state mosque in its imposing grandeur) or innovative borrowing and change without blending. Christians often complain, for example, that Buddhists now deploy many of their most popular practices, offering didactic preaching, formulating their doctrine in catechisms, distributing multilingual tracts, and reaching out to youth through Sunday schools and youth groups. The symbolic, ritual, and doctrinal content are, however, unaffected by the adoption of novel practices and technologies and modernist Buddhists remain unaligned with (and indeed compete with) Christians.<sup>6</sup>

### **Syncretism, Amity, and Co-celebration**

In a multi-religious field of practice, minority religious groups commonly forge alliances and co-celebrate events. Although institutionally separate, these groups often have a sense of interconnectedness and may join together in a relationship of mutual support. Although these ritual collaborations are not syncretism in the commonplace sense that I have termed syncretic fusion, nonetheless some definitions emphasise the social basis of syncretism as expressing “the joining of two or agreement of two enemies against a third person” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971:3210). In the entry for the term ‘syncretise,’ the OED editor adds that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the term was explained to mean: “To form alliances in the manner of the Cretans.” Whether or not this etymology is correct, this suggests the joining of unlike groups for strategic purposes, each retaining its separate identity. I propose that religious co-celebration that joins together two religiously defined groups (however closely related they might be in their ritual traditions) should be regarded as a form of syncretism.

In Chinese popular religious culture, temples that normally work independently of one another commonly work together to stage large-scale rituals and public processions during their annual festivals. These temples share a common ritual idiom while respecting social boundaries. As an example of

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<sup>5</sup> To give but one example, Singapore’s City Harvest Church broadcasts webcasts of its weekly services on a website that offers a wealth of information (for more information on City Harvest Church, see Tong, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> In a similar fashion, Chinese spirit mediums began at some unknown date to incorporate Hindu-style fire walking into their ritual performances at festivals without incorporating other aspects of Hinduism.



co-celebration, consider the common ritual of incense exchange. In 2004, a Daoist priest invited me to Singapore's Zhongyi Temple to watch a procession in which many possessed spirit mediums from different temples participated, each performing the ritual of incense exchange at an open-air altar that stood before the temple. When I asked the priest to explain the meaning of this ritual, he advised me that if I watched I would understand.

One by one, the gods-in-their-spirit mediums, wearing brilliant costumes and many with elaborately painted faces, approached the altar. There, the god-in-the-medium stopped and offered lit joss sticks, which his or her assistants placed in the incense urn. The god-in-the-medium then received back lit joss sticks and departed, followed by his or her retinue. In this instance, the altar stood before a temple but sometimes we find the same ceremony performed in front of the home or business of a temple patron. Often we find the same ceremony performed with the statue of the god, carried in a gilded sedan chair.

After watching this ritual repeated many times in many different locations, I conclude that the exchange of incense expresses amity between two groups — that of the host whose altar the urn sits upon, and that of the guest, the possessed spirit medium and his followers or the deity statue carried from altar to altar in a rocking palanquin. The urn collects ashes from all who use it for worship, and symbolises the temple as a social and spiritual group (see Feuchtwang, 2001:135–139; ter Haar, 1993). If the host is a temple patron, he may hope that this visit will bring good fortune for his family or business. But the limits of amity are clear: I have never seen a Chinese procession stop at a mosque or a Christian Church or a Hindu temple (although the latter would certainly be imaginable).<sup>7</sup>

Although the exchange of incense is not performed in Christian churches, nonetheless we find syncretic amity expressed through participation in Christian festival events. As Yeoh Seng Guan has so richly documented, many non-Christian Chinese venerate Saint Anne — Mary's mother and Jesus' grandmother — on her feast day, making the pilgrimage to Saint Anne's Church in Bukit Mertajam (see, Yeoh, 2008).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As I describe elsewhere, I also have seen the god-in-the-spirit medium enter first a Buddhist centre, where he beat his back with a sword until blood flowed, and next a famous local Daoist temple, where his assistants pounded a large drum as he venerated at the altars (DeBernardi, 2006:262–263).

<sup>8</sup> We find a brief but intriguing example of syncretic amity in the Penang performance of the Shi'ite festival Muharram before its prohibition. In 1859 and 1862, the registered participants in Muharram included teams of Bengali, Malay, Hindu, Tamil, Chinese, Burmese, and Portuguese

A loosely structured festival collaboration like the pilgrimage to Saint Anne's Church expresses amity, but this form of amity probably does not endure beyond the time and space of celebration. We find more organised and enduring alliances within broad religious traditions, as when charismatic Christians of diverse denominations join together to stage rallies in public stadiums, or when Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists in Malaysia join to celebrate Wesak Day (the Lord Buddha's birthday) with public float processions in Penang and Kuala Lumpur. By comparison with the kind of toleration and accommodation governments promote through inter-religious dialogues, these alliances are based on selective affinities and consequently are strong expressions of amity.

### **Syncretic Juxtaposition: The Altar**

Religious practitioners also implicitly recognise syncretic amity when they assemble images of deities on their altars or in their shrine rooms. When Chinese place statues stand next to each other on a temple or family altar, for example, they may include favourite deities from Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religious culture. If asked (by an anthropologist, for example) they may distinguish Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; popular deities (*shen* or *angkong*); and Daoist deities like Taishang Laojun and the Eight Immortals. Some who have more specialised knowledge will describe their form of religious practice as the Three Religions (Mandarin: *Sanjiao*; Hokkien: *Samkau*), demonstrating their awareness that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are three distinct traditions that are blended in practice.

Although the ranking of deities is conventionally agreed on, nonetheless this ranking is not uniform. Individuals may reveal their special esteem for certain deities by elevating their rank on the altar, or display photographs or talismans to express a special affinity with a Buddhist monastery, a Daoist shrine, or a charismatic religious figure, like Sai Baba. Meanwhile, when members of different groups join their deities together on a single altar at a temple, they often imagine this novel arrangement as a brotherhood (see, for example, DeBernardi, 2004:191–193).

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(probably Eurasian) dancers. The Penang Chinese community contributed two lion dance teams with fifteen to twenty performers (DeBernardi, 2006:20; see also Sinha in this volume). The syncretic juxtaposition was decidedly not incorporation since each group maintained its distinct identity. I regard this form of multi-ethnic, multi-religious competitive cooperation as syncretic amity.

## **Syncretism and Story**

In everyday life, stories explore an individual's experiences as they meet with challenges, conflicts and adventures. By contrast, religious narratives are commonly overtly didactic, seeking to convince the hearer or reader of the correctness of a particular point of view or set of practices. The authors of religious narratives may also use narratives to symbolically encompass and subordinate their competitors within their own frameworks of value.

Take stories whose characters are the founders or practitioners of competing traditions. Penang Daoists like to tell a story that imagines a dialogue between Laozi and Confucius in which Confucius appears to acknowledge Laozi's superiority. In Chinese popular novels we also frequently encounter stories that report magical contests between competing religious practitioners (a Buddhist priest and a Daoist master, for example) in which one triumphs over the other. And Penang oral narratives include many stories about competing magicians from different ethnic backgrounds in which the Chinese magician invariably triumphs, albeit with great difficulty (see DeBernardi, 2006:117–118). Such stories set out divine affinities, competitions, and antagonisms in a wide field of practice.

Although the genre may seem too humble or irreverent to consider as an expression of syncretism or anti-syncretism, we also find many jokes exploring the relationships among different religions. Often these take the form of some kind of interaction or contest among leaders of the different major religious traditions. As an instance, take a satirical article entitled "Jesus Denies Coalition Talks with Buddha and Vishnu," which reported that people were speculating that these three deities were considering forming an alliance in the face of a growing tide of atheism and disillusionment with organised religions (Effkay, 2007).

We also find more personal narratives in which an individual tells of their encounters with divine beings. Commonly people seek to communicate with the deities or dream of them, or feel that they have had intense personal experiences that demonstrate a close personal bond. When they incorporate these experiences into personal narratives, these narratives may provide a charter for adding new elements into existing traditions.

Although Chinese popular religionists might not venerate Saint Anne on their family altars, and Chinese spirit mediums may not enter Christian churches seeking to exchange incense with the priests, nonetheless they sometimes claimed to have had first-hand experience of her and/or other Christian saints. One spirit medium that I interviewed attended the annual pilgrimage to Saint Anne's Church and claimed to have seen Saint Anne on the road. Another had a personal encounter with Mary that he described to me in detail.

He recalled that he visited a Catholic church in central George Town when a statue of Mary of Fatima was brought to Penang. He could not enter, and met the goddess outside. He told her he was not a Christian, and she responded, “Neither am I.” Later she visited him and counselled him to rely on himself (DeBernardi, 2006:242).

### **Amity and Symbolic Encompassment**

In story, ritual practice, and other forms of dramatic representation, Chinese may imagine religious others in light of unequal relations of spiritual power. I regard this as a form of amity but with the added claim to having neutralised and/or contained a potential opponent or rival. In such situations religious practitioners incorporate into their teachings or practices some aspect of a religion that exists within a wider social field, but do so with the goal of reducing or neutralising its power through a strategy of symbolic encompassment. In a situation of conversion, for example, we often find that local gods have been incorporated into a new pantheon but in a subordinate position.<sup>9</sup> These gods may of course still exist and be independently venerated by their devotees, untouched by these claims to encompassment.

Take for example the Penang Chinese placation of local spirits that they call *Natu* spirits, which we may regard as syncretic in the traditional sense. But rather than merge a world religion like Christianity with a local religion, worship of these spirits fuses two forms of animistic practice, Chinese and Malay, that probably share deep historic roots. As I have discussed elsewhere (DeBernardi, 2006, Chapter 4), Chinese control *Natu* spirits using the same ritual strategies that Chinese use to neutralise the threat posed by ghosts, adapting acts of ritual etiquette to the spirit’s religion and ethnicity. They respect (Malay: *hormat*) them by giving them an honorific title (*Natu Kong*, *Datuk Kong*) and by offering them flowers, camphor incense, and food, including many Malay dishes, but never pork, since most of these spirits are considered to be Muslim. The objects used for worship and the language describing acts of worship define two parallel but distinct unseen worlds. Often Chinese will place special shrines for them that resemble small open-fronted houses, locating them by the roadside or in a yard next to a large tree or boulder. This form of

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<sup>9</sup> We find much of this in Chinese popular vernacular religious literature, including especially Buddhist literature. In novels like *Monkey (Journey to the West)*, for example, Buddhists often reveal local gods to be frauds. For example, in one episode of *Journey to the West*, Monkey battles with three Daoist priests, who finally are revealed to be animal spirits (Waley, 1980 [1943]). Bernard Faure’s work on localisation of Buddhism suggests that this is a very active process in Buddhism (1987).

veneration precisely illustrates syncretic amity, since Chinese incorporate these spirits into their ritual practices at the same time that they recognise and show respect for their separateness.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless they do so with the goal of containment.

If encompassment retains symbolic elements of a historically distinct tradition within a shared framework, we may continue to speak of syncretic amity. In some cases, however, religions incorporate rivals into a religious framework of meaning not as allies, but as demons who possibly are masquerading as gods, defrauding those who mistakenly venerate them. Didactic religious stories often recount the deity's actions in unmasking these so-called gods and deposing them from their altars and shrines.

Let me now turn to three ethnographic examples to demonstrate syncretic amity, anti-syncretic campaigns, and the syncretic encompassment of sacred space.

### **Wudang Mountain: Sacred Space and Co-celebration**

Many of the world's most ancient religions are deeply rooted in landscapes that are held to be sacred. Those introducing new religions often have build their churches and temples on top of older religious structures, thereby co-opting ancient sacred sites and integrating them into a new framework of meaning and practice. In his article in this volume, for example, Yeoh Seng Guan (2008) notes that Saint Anne's church in Bukit Mertajam was built in proximity with what appears to have been an ancient Hindu-Buddhist shrine. Similarly, in Western Canada, First Nations Catholics make a pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne, an ancient sacred site for local aboriginal populations that became identified with the feast day for Jesus' grandmother (Anderson-McLean, 1999).

From 2002 to 2007, I participated in a collaborative research project that focused on one of the most sacred sites of Daoism, Wudang Mountain, in northern Hubei Province, People's Republic of China. Wudang Mountain's extensive temple complex includes grand and small temples dispersed throughout a mountain range. On the highest peak in this range — the Golden Peak — is a small bronze temple dedicated to the Emperor of the Dark Heavens, a deity of the north and of rain who also was an important

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<sup>10</sup> In Singapore, the worship of Malay spirits like *Natu Kong* is often conjoined with veneration of the Chinese God of Prosperity, as, for example, at Kusu Island, where a God of Prosperity temple has been built close to a small hillock atop which sits a shrine dedicated to a Malay spirit.

patron deity for the Ming Dynasty. A didactic popular novel retelling his life story spread his cult nationally during that dynasty, and he remains highly popular with practitioners of Chinese popular religion in South China and Southeast Asia (Seaman, 1988; see also Chao, 2002; DeBernardi, 2004:190).

The temples on the mountain are linked to events in the god's multiple lives as told in his story, *The Journey to the North*, which recounts successive rebirths as he seeks to regain heaven through self-cultivation (see Lagerwey, 1987). The Quanzhen sect of Daoism associated with Wudang Mountain fuses elements drawn from both Daoism and Buddhism (in particular Chan Buddhism), emphasising ascetism and meditation. The god's story is a vehicle to teach readers about karmic action and retribution, promoting a path or way (*dao*) to enlightenment through the practice of virtue, ascetic discipline, and meditation. In a fascinating form of syncretic fusion through multiple life biography, in one rebirth he apparently is born as Laozi, and in another as the Shakyamuni Buddha.

Traditionally, the god's devotees made the pilgrimage to his mountaintop shrine twice a year during the third and ninth lunar months. During the Cultural Revolution the temples were closed to worship and the priests and nuns driven out, but the monasteries reopened and the pilgrimages resumed when the prohibitions were lifted. Wudang Mountain earned UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1994, and is now developed as a tourist site, with an entrance fee, a system of buses that visitors from zone to zone, a cable car that makes the journey to the Golden Peak fast and convenient, hotels and restaurants, and a number of secondary enterprises, including a tea plantation and martial arts school. Although still relatively difficult to reach, the development of travel infrastructure in China has promoted its popularity as a tourist destination to regional, national, and international tourists, including many visitors from Greater China (as Chinese populations outside China's political boundaries are sometimes known).

We find an intriguing example of syncretic encompassment here. Part way up the pilgrim trail, the devotee encounters Little Wudang Mountain, which is a small up-thrusting hillock in a village of the same name. Atop this tiny peak — a miniature of the far grander peak that may be scaled with far less effort — is a small shrine with three stone statues. Here we see evidence that although imperial devotions at Wudang Mountain are centuries old, peasant veneration of local deities at this spectacularly scenic site probably was even older.

According to local folklore, when the Emperor of the Dark Heavens decided to build a temple on the top of Tianzhu Peak, he found that the summit was not wide enough. Consequently, he cut the peak away with his sword. The peak

fell on a place beside Yellow-dragon Cave with a loud crash, and became Little Wudang Mountain. The original deity who had lived atop Wudang Mountain moved with the mountaintop, displaced when the imperial god took over his mountain. Thus, the majestic glory of the bronze temple on the Golden Peak finds an echo in Little Wudang Mountain, whose summit holds a small, peasant shrine. The relative position and grandeur of the two shrines express a relationship of domination that the story of the god's demotion explains.

At Wudang Mountain today, we also find an excellent example of syncretic amity in the collaborations that exist between the Daoist priests and nuns and groups of religious practitioners who make the pilgrimage to the mountain, including in particular large organised groups of devotees from temples in Taiwan. I term this kind of collaboration *co-celebration*, and it may be either spontaneous or orchestrated.

As an example of spontaneous co-celebration, take an instance when a Taiwanese man who was part of an organised group spontaneously fell into trance, possessed by the spirit of the Emperor of the Dark Heavens. He did so precisely when the Daoist priests and nuns sang to ritually invoke the gods at a flagpole as part of the opening ceremonies during the ninth lunar month. Although his actions coordinated neatly with theirs, the priests and nuns do not practice any form of spirit possession and are unlikely to have participated in planning this event.

In a second case, a Taiwanese group performed three sets of rituals at a newly reconstructed Ming Dynasty temple at a nearby town, Danjiangkou. These three ceremonies expressed the group's syncretic doctrine, joining together elements of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism.

At a major ceremony at which the Taiwanese officiated, Daoist priests and martial artists from Wudang Mountain, members of the Taiwanese group, and local religious leaders and politicians joined together, marching in formal procession to pray at the gate of the newly opened temple before returning to the shrine room. This highly formal ceremony and procession had a decidedly Confucian flavour, displaying the rank of religious and secular leaders to the public who stood outside the temple watching, waiting for the ritual to end so that they could enter the temple to pray and obtain oracular written charms through divination with numbered bamboo sticks.

On that day the Taiwanese group also conducted an extended session of planchette divination that was not co-celebrated. Simultaneously some of their members performed Buddhist chanting and made offerings for the souls of the dead at a temporary altar constructed at the side of the temple courtyard. Later that afternoon, their leaders stood in attendance while Daoist priests from Wudang Mountain's main monastery, Zixiao Gong, performed a ceremony.

As befits their status as members of the China Taoist Association and ritual practitioners at a temple that is also an important cultural heritage site, Wudang Mountain's Quanzhen Daoist monks and nuns seek to develop Daoist practices that distinguish them from their competitors (primarily Buddhists). They also seek to brand Daoism by associating it with a variety of historic Chinese practices, from calligraphy and the martial arts *taijiquan* (which is said to have been invented at Wudang Mountain) to so-called Daoist tea culture (see also DeBernardi, 2008c). Although the priests and nuns are orthodox in their training and practice, they do engage in co-celebration with ritual practitioners like the Taiwanese lay Daoists whom I describe above and at least tolerate an occasional trance performance by visiting spirit mediums, whose practice the Chinese authorities do not accept as legitimate. I propose that this is a form of syncretic amity in which groups join together to pursue a common purpose while preserving quite separate religious and institutional identities.

### **Spiritual Warfare and Anti-syncretic Campaigns**

A temple site like Wudang Mountain provides a highly dramatic and satisfying backdrop for ritual performances and this is, no doubt, part of its wide appeal to those who practice diverse forms of Daoism. Modern forms of Christianity, by contrast, especially Protestant groups that have severed links with historic denominations, suffer from a deficit of historic sites. They may demonstrate intense interest in the Holy Land, making a pilgrimage there to retrace Jesus' movements. But Protestant Christianity in general is neither visually rich, nor rooted in a sacred landscape. During the colonial period Protestant missionaries in Singapore and Penang often lamented that their modest churches and chapels could not compete with grand Buddhist monasteries and polychromatic Hindu and Daoist temples. In contemporary Asia, Christians have become masters of the forms of modernity, organising mass events in indoor stadiums and building enormous churches that deploy technology effectively. But even so, their relationship to the landscape is typically inconsequential (DeBernardi n.d.).

In light of this fact, one of the most striking developments of the last two decades has been the promotion of an influential theology that incorporates space into evangelical theory and practice. In that period, many charismatic Christians have become enthusiastic practitioners of a practice known as 'spiritual warfare,' which has as a corollary 'spiritual mapping.' Although the idiom of spiritual warfare is not a new one, since around 1990 a number of charismatic evangelists, including Korea's Yongyi Cho and C. Peter Wagner (1991,



1998), have used books, travel, and the internet to promote it. This movement is global in scope, and has its origin in the writings of authors like George Otis, whose 1995 book, *Strongholds of the 10/40 Window: Intercessor's Guide to the World's Least Evangelized Nations* include extensive information on the sacred sites of traditional religious cultures (see DeBernardi, 1999, 2008a).

In his book, he lists the “unreached peoples” in a number of countries (from Afghanistan to Yemen), and for each identifies the “spiritual competition.” Otis also identifies “national prayer concerns,” including “spiritual power points” and festivals and pilgrimages. In the entry on Malaysia, for example, Otis recommends that people pray over these spiritual power points: the Shah Alam Mosque in Selangor (which apparently is the largest mosque in the world), the Islamic Centre in Kuala Lumpur (which stands next to the National Mosque), and both the Snake Temple and Kek Lok Si, the major Buddhist temple in Penang whose construction of monumental statues of the Goddess of Mercy I mention above. Otis further also recommends that Christians pray to ‘break spiritual strongholds’ during major festivals, like Thaipusam and Ramadan.

One independent Charismatic Church in Penang, for example, is situated next to the so-called Snake Temple, which is dedicated to a deity popular in Fujian and Southeast Asia, the Clear Water Patriarch (*Qingshui Zushi Gong*). For some years the minister convened prayer group every morning at 6am to pray against the Snake Temple (although at Sunday service in 2002 he complained that no one was joining him and threatened to leave his congregation).

Although some Christians oppose these practices, critiquing them as a form of Christian animism lacking a Biblical foundation, others, including many Singaporean and Malaysian charismatic Christians, took to them with enthusiasm. Elsewhere I speculate that many Christians now stress forms of prayer that they term prayer evangelism, including spiritual warfare prayers, precisely because they are facing increasing restrictions on the conduct of evangelistic outreach. In the colonial period, Asian and European Christians commonly distributed tracts and exhorted passersby on street corners and even at temples during temple festivals, when they could be certain to draw a large crowd. After independence, the Malaysian and Singaporean governments both deemed street corner evangelism to be a potential threat to religious harmony and severely restricted it. Prayer evangelism is typically performed within Christian circles and Christian leaders may use it to mobilise interest and support for their mission projects (DeBernardi, 2008b).

When I interviewed a high-ranking Christian leader in Singapore in 1999, he revealed that charismatic Christian leaders had formed a ‘high-level’ committee to do spiritual mapping of Singapore. After some research they had learned that Singapore’s Anglican Cathedral stood on the head of the

dragon, a geomantically favourable location. He and other Christians whom I interviewed found no contradiction between Christianity and the traditional Chinese practice of geomancy (*feng shui*), which one seminarian described as a science. At least some charismatic Christians have added sacred geography, including geomancy, to their repertoire of practices.

Christian authors who promote spiritual warfare are anti-syncretic, insisting on the expulsion of demonic spirits like the Goddess of Mercy and the God of Prosperity from people's religious lives. At the same time, however, their practices are giving new meaning to deities, sacred places, and festival events by making them the site of prayer and special worship (see also Meyer, 1994). Spiritual warfare and spiritual mapping, then, I would argue, involve a significant incorporation of sacred geographies into a relatively modern form of Christian evangelical practice but with the goal of symbolic encompassment and domination.

### **Syncretism and Sacred Space: Holy Mount Zion in Taiwan**

In my third and final example, I explore the recent development of a Taiwanese Christian sacred mountain. Whereas those who engage in spiritual mapping seek to identify spiritual power points, including those associated with non-Christian religions, the founder of this mountain, Eden (as it is also known), created a remarkable spiritual power point for his followers. I propose that this mountain represents a powerful syncretic fusion of Chinese culture and Christianity. This church represents what Daniel Goh has termed a “new modern religious Asianism in the guise of charismatic Christianity,” characterised by pastors who take on “the role of prophetic sectarian founders and develop new forms, meanings, and practices melding together Chinese religion and Charismatic Christian elements” (Goh, 2008).<sup>11</sup>

Elijah Hong, the leader of a Chinese sectarian group known as the *Grace of Jesus Christ Crusade*, found this remote mountain area in 1963 and obtained rights to the land, which he initially used as a farm. In 1979, however, he decided to settle there with his followers, declaring it to be the new Mount Zion:

God has forsaken Jerusalem in the Middle East. He has chosen Mount Zion in the Far East. Mount Zion in Hsiaolin is the mountain of the LORD's house, as mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah. All nations shall flow to this mountain on pilgrimage. They will come to worship the Great King of Zion! (Mount Zion International, 2008)

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<sup>11</sup> Murray A. Rubinstein (1994, 1996) has explored the success of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Taiwan, which he explains in light of congruencies between their practices and those of Chinese popular religious culture.

In 1980 the Kuomintang ruling party ousted them from the mountain and they launched a lengthy campaign to regain control of the land. Successful at last, they returned and established a thriving business growing and marketing a variety of organic products, including pharmaceuticals and foods made with plum, aloe, and camellia.

Like Wudang Mountain, Mount Zion is both a tourist destination and a pilgrimage point. Tourists arrive by car or bus in a central area with ample parking, where they will find a small museum detailing the group's history and a shop selling Mount Zion's organic products and exquisite black pearls from Tahiti produced by an affiliated Christian group. The group provides copies of its publications in English and Mandarin on their website for free download. At Mount Zion they distribute free books and brochures, including the works of Kong Duen Yee, a former actress whose speaking tours in Asia in the 1960s led to the founding of many local churches.

Recent developments include the propagation of a network of affiliated churches, all quite similar architecturally, in Sarawak (Bethel, Bethany, Mt. Camel, Mt. Moriah, Sapit Highland, Eden by the Sea, Canaan), Malaysia (Hebron), Tahiti (Mount Tabor), Sabah (Bethlehem, New Heaven New Earth), California (Mt. Olive), Polynesia (Eden Isle), New Zealand (Mt. Ararat), and South Africa (Mt. Hermon).

California's Mt. Olive is located in Paso Robles, a small town midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles that is one of many established wine-growing regions in the state. On their website, Mt. Olive Organic Foods claims to be a sustainable certified organic farm run by Christians who believe that organic farming is "the most accurate and meaningful way of life." Mt. Olive grows olives and a variety of fruits and also sells processed products like jams, juices, and fruit bars. They distribute their products through farmer's markets in their local area and also maintain a bakery, store, and restaurant.<sup>12</sup> They apparently also export products to Taiwan, and the shop at Mount Zion offered some of these for sale.

Here we find another intriguing parallel with Chinese (more precisely Daoist) cultural practices. Visitors to Wudang Mountain, for example, sometimes seek to learn about Daoist health preserving practices (nourishing life, *yang-sheng*). These include martial arts like *taijiquan*, which contemporary practitioners believe strengthens the body's immune system, the adoption of a vegetarian diet, and the expert use of healing herbs. To that end, visitors often seek meals prepared with wild plants and many also purchase pharmaceutical

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<sup>12</sup> I draw information on Mt. Olive from their website: <http://www.mtoliveco.com/farm/> [accessed 5 July 2008].

herbs, which they believe to have a special efficacy because they were grown at Wudang Mountain. Similarly, members of this Christian collective propose that the foods and herbal products that they grow on their global network of Edenic farms have exceptional health benefits.

The website YouTube currently hosts a small number of videos of Mount Zion and its affiliated churches. These include one of Mount Olive that shows a series of photographs accompanied by a group rendition of a song, “Living Free,” which appears to be the church’s anthem. The video is subtitled in English and Mandarin and shows smiling young ethnic Chinese workers picking fruit and raising goats, rabbits and chickens. Although the founders of this church stressed that they sought to restore the first century New Testament Church, the lyrics of “Living Free” reveal that their rural idyll is also a new Eden and a return to the first creation: “Freedom is to lead a life according to God’s law in Eden. Freedom! Born to be free, we live free! Walking with God, dwelling with Him, Edenites are we. That’s the way it should be. Living free!”<sup>13</sup> Sung in Mandarin, the same hymn accompanies another video showing film clips of people working and playing together in the church’s farms throughout the world.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to Taiwan, Mount Zion’s website encourages pilgrims to visit during the Feast of Tabernacles, a week-long festival held annually from 15 to 21 July. In Judaism, the Feast of Tabernacles is *Sukkot* (Hebrew, meaning “booths”), a festival celebrating the harvest that occurs in late September to late October. Historically *Sukkot* was one of three major festivals during which people travelled on a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Feast of Tabernacles is an important holiday for observant Jews, but most Christian denominations do not celebrate it.

In inviting pilgrims to this festival at Holy Mount Zion, these Taiwanese Christians have developed an event that resonates with the practices of local religious culture. Practitioners of Chinese popular religion, for example, commonly visit major temples dedicated to Mazu during her festival, or more rarely make the pilgrimage to Wudang Mountain during the third or ninth lunar months. Their celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles does not suggest any form of reconciliation with local religious practices or ritual performers. But undoubtedly these Taiwanese Christians recognised a powerful congruency between this Biblical pilgrimage and Chinese festivals and creatively melded the two.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UeFTDGwo8sA> [accessed 5 July 2008]. Another short video clip of Mount Olive shows a rainbow framing their church can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah9PTh5wqbk> [accessed 5 July 2008].

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDN9zjnVTdk> [accessed 5 July 2008].

Their website also reports that tens of thousands of people visit Mount Zion during the Chinese New Year period. Those who practice Chinese popular religious culture go to a temple to pray at the New Year, and many seek to enter as soon as possible after midnight. If these visitors are non-Christian (as seems likely), this suggests that they regard Mt. Zion as one among many spiritually powerful locations in their environment irrespective of its Christian identity.

At Wudang Mountain, as the pilgrim approaches the summit he or she passes through three gates: the lower heaven gate, the middle heaven gate, and the upper heaven gate, implying that one has reached heaven at the mountain's summit. At Mount Zion the pilgrim also experiences the passage through gates, including the Cherubim gate, a white-pillared gate framing a mountain vista. On the left and right ends of the top lintel are two angels whose wings sweep towards the centre. In the middle of the lintel stands a small silhouette of Mount Zion, framed by their feathery wings. Their website describes the grandeur of the setting for potential visitors, noting that soon after passing through the Cherubim Gate, "... which instils a sense of awe as if one has met the angelic guards," the visitor encounters a greeting centre, a gated entry controlled by a guard. There, the guard requests that visitors remove any "idol related items" since Mount Zion is "the holy mountain that testifies for Jesus Christ."

**Figure 2: The Cherubim Gate at the entry to Holy Mount Zion, Taiwan, May 2008.**  
(Photograph: Jean DeBernardi)



Before arriving at the gate we hid the temple anniversary volumes that we had collected earlier that day and tucked the protective charm hanging from the car rear-view mirror so that it could not be seen. Even though we did not share their religious convictions, on our arrival several residents spoke with us at length and gave us a tour of their grounds.

As they described their history to us we learned that geomancy profoundly shapes their understanding of the special nature of their mountaintop Eden. Members believe, for example, that the reason the Kuomintang leaders were so keen to evict them from Mount Zion is that their legitimacy was faltering and they wanted to claim the powerful geomantic forces of the mountain. The website notes that the terrain resembles a king's throne, and one of their videos illustrates this point by superimposing the drawing of a throne over a photograph of the mountain top.<sup>15</sup>

In another intriguing congruency, one member showed us a tall pole in a large cleared area where residents gather to pray. She noted that the pole pointed to the North star — Polaris, the still centre of the night sky around which the other stars appear to rotate — which is also an object of special veneration for Daoists. The sacred mountain itself is a kind of pole, universally imagined as a world axis linking heaven and earth, and the centre where North, South, East, and West meet.

Members proudly noted that an Israeli delegate to Taiwan came to Mount Zion as their guest. We can only wonder what this Israeli visitor thought of the notion that God had moved a piece of Israel whose history dates back three millennia to Taiwan. From the analytical perspective that I have taken in this paper, however, surely the act of merging Israel's Biblical geography with Taiwan's is an act of syncretic fusion. When the Grace of Jesus Christ Crusade — a Christian group only formed in the 1960s — claims that Mount Zion now is in Taiwan, they are asserting that one of the newest twigs on the branch has become the deepest root.

## **Conclusion**

People rarely practice religions in isolation, and in their complex interactions we may find a range of attitudes, from amity and collaboration, to mutual indifference, to rivalry and avoidance. Even joining together for a shared meal — a universal symbol of amity — can be enormously complicated if the

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<sup>15</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang (1974:121) notes that mountains receive "...more attention in feng-shui manuals than any other cultural phenomena," adding that they represent nature in Chinese poetry and painting.

guests include members of religious groups that set out their differences through dietary restrictions.

In this paper, I have proposed that we consider the diverse ways in which religious practitioners deploy syncretism in a wider field of practice. I have departed from a focus on doctrinal syncretism to consider the implications of exploring syncretism as a form of amity expressed in ritual co-celebration, the arrangement of deities on an altar, or story. At the same time, I have proposed that syncretic blending may be a strategy of symbolic encompassment in which religious practitioners incorporate competitors into a religious system of representation and practice as a means of subordinating them.

The topic of syncretism reminds us that any religious field of practice we will encounter a multiplicity of unique pasts. Some religious pasts define pivotal moments in time for believers, like the Christian salvation story, in which Christians look back to the crucifixion of Christ but also forward to the Last Days. Others form the basis of co-celebration, as when mainland Chinese and Taiwanese Daoists join together to venerate a shared ancestral deity whose story spans centuries. The religious field of practice also includes numinous territorial centres at which these pasts are uniquely immanent: the Holy Land for Christians, Wudang Mountain for Daoists.

Daoists and Christians may claim the distinction of practicing historically deep traditions of the sort that Edward Sapir termed genuine cultures, which he compared to a "...sturdy plant growth, each remotest leaf and twig of which is organically fed by the sap at the core" (1924:412). Daoists at Wudang Mountain, for example, commonly assert that their religion is at the very root of Chinese culture, and many Protestants (including the Grace of Jesus Christ Crusade that founded Holy Mount Zion) claim to practice a form of Christianity based on the true apostolic practices of the first century Church.

Both in the past and today, religious innovators within those traditions have reworked sacred geographies, refashioned ancient festivals and rituals, and attached new narratives to the landscape in multi-religious fields of practice. Although we should probably discard (or at least challenge) the notion of genuine cultures, nonetheless the topic of syncretism reveals that religious practitioners often seek to practice their religions in ways that both connect them to the deepest roots of their traditions (by making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or Wudang Mountain, for example) and emplace those deep traditions in complex fields of practice.

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